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ABSTRACT

The overwhelming impression from an examination of developing nations throughout the world is that there is no neat and universal explanation of what employers want from school and university education. Neither does there appear to be any firm connection between scholastic qualifications and job functions. The nearly universal absence of a systematic matching of jobs and employees makes it more appropriate to think in terms of a theory based on unexamined assumptions, rules-of-thumb, inertia, and narrow responses to changing circumstances. The only consensus seems to be that some schooling for employment in the modern job sector is desirable. Apart from that, the relative importance of such factors as having adequate preparation, identifying ability and potential, screening for social compatibility, or political screening is subject to dispute and wide variation. Qualifications or educational credentials appear to function simply as a convenient starting point for employers, whether they be small organizations or governments (when they are acting as employers). When acting as educators, however, governments should recognize explicitly that the links between levels of schooling and particular jobs are largely arbitrary. They might then organize their educational reforms with less attention to labor force development and more attention to high-quality schooling from the first grade. Employee selection and job-specific training appear to be best left to employers. (MN)

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What do Employers Want From Education?

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Let me start with four quotations one from employers, the second from an intermediary between employers and job-seekers, the third from manpower planning, and the fourth from an academic observer of the three.

> "In selecting candidates, employers are placing more and more emphasis on personal qualities, which cannot be taken for granted even in applicants with very good academic qualifications. The ability to communicate, both orally and in writing, together with good motivation, potential leadership qualities, breadth of outlook and a positive attitude to change, are obvious requirements alongside numeracy and specialist skills".
>
> Confederation of British Industry in its response to the British Governments Green Paper on higher education, 1986.

> "It is not sufficiently understood that less than 40 per cent of the total demand is for the highly specialised, while the biggest single demand is for graduates of any discipline.
>
> There always has been and no doubt always will be a huge demand for broadly based first-degree candidates who are recruited for their trained minds, problem-solving capacities, their social skills and their mobility. Industrial and commercial recruiters find that arts and social science graduates meet these requirements and are easily trained in new skills".
>
> Senior Careers Adviser,
> Saint Andrew's University,
> Scotland, 1986

> "What is probably more remarkable still is the change that has come over the (manpower) forecasters themselves, ... they now reject the idea of comparing manpower needs and availability as a means of providing guidance to the training system"
>
> Jean-Jacques Paul, 1985

> "In a free market the salaries of technicians would rise relatively to those of skilless and mediocre graduates in arts, but since the government, the principal buyer, bases relative salaries on tradition rather than on scarcity, the market situation cannot right itself"
>
> W. Arthur Lewis, 1977

The implied drift of all four quotations is that the relationships between education, employment and salaries are broad, imprecise, even arbitrary. We might infer that educators would be imprudent to worry much about what employers wanted from education. They would be wiser to worry more about good teaching, good learning and helping people to develop all the abilities they possibly can. The evidence I want to put before you, will I think confirm the good sense of that view.

Working Terms

Before I move to the evidence, though, I had better let you know what I mean by certain words which are central in this context.
First, employers are not individual men and women. Rather, they are employing organisations like governments and corporations. This sort of employer tends to account for the bulk of waged or salaried employment in most economies. So, if I use employer in the singular, I will use the pronoun it, rather than he or she.

Qualification can mean the licence for specialised set of skills, like those of an electrician, or the simple completion of a level of schooling with a set of skills with general application, like literacy and numeracy and the ability to reason systematically. I shall always mean general qualifications.

Recruiting Employing and training organisations take at least two steps when they want to get new employees or trainees. They first delimit a pool of potential employees within the total labour force, then from that pool select the people who appear to fall least short of their requirements. The preliminary delimitation is recruiting, the second step in selection.

Employees Because our interest is what employers seek in the educated, we shall restrict ourselves to the freshly educated. Employees then indicate young people with general qualifications who are just starting to earn their own livings in salaried employment with large employing organisations.

DIFFERENCES AND INEQUALITIES

Selecting between people means that employers accept pragmatically that there are differences between people. They also accept that there are inequalities between people: some electricians are neater and more meticulous than others. We shall be asking here what differences do different levels of general qualifications make to the qualities, skills and knowledge that are sought by employing organisations? For example, in Mexico there is a three-year difference in schooling between secundario (a 9-year qualification) and preparatoria (12 years). In what ways does their difference affect whatever is sought in the generally qualified? Then, within a level, what does inequality of performance signify for the employer? For example, in Sri Lanka in 1975-1977, the government valued a distinction at O level 50 per cent higher than a credit and 87.5 per cent higher than a pass. How are inequalities in scholastic performance interpreted in recruiting and selecting employees?

We should note here a universal assumption and practice. Increased schooling is believed to increase suitability for more responsible and demanding work, (and of course higher salaries). Similarly, better performance within a level tends to provide an edge of advantage over inferior performance, - all else being equal. Varying historical experience and varying political regimes make no differnces to this central belief. We would be justified then in believing it ran well, even incontrovertibly founded. We could expect that there would be close agreement between employing organisations on what levels and performances of education would be required for given jobs or groups of jobs.

CONSISTENCIES?

Let us test whether that agreement actually exists, first between employers in different countries, then between those in a single country. Since primary schooling - of between five and eight years, depending on the country - and middle schooling of between eight and ten years have almost universally ceased to count as qualifications for jobs - and in some countries even for training, - a convenient starting point is the general secondary school course. O Levels in Britain and most of the states it influened; the Baccalaureat in states influenced by France; "high school" in states adopting the North American pattern; and preparatoria in states like Mexico, are now the minimum qualifications required for most clerical or junior white-collar jobs. The context of such work does not appear to differ much from country to country. We might expect then that the same level or quantity of schooling would be required for it.

But level turns out not to mean the same as quantity. In Sri Lanka, O levels took 10 years to achieve. In India and Kenya, they took 11. The Baccalaureat, high school and preparatoria represent 12 years of school. (Indeed, parenthetically, Zambia's Junior Secondary Certificate, Cameroon's Probatoire pre-secondary exam and Ghana's Middle School Leaving Certificate needed as much time as Sri Lanka's O levels, but gave access to lower level jobs like clerical assistants.) True, the largest difference is only 2 years. Yet, think what those 2 years imply in countries where universal primary education has not been achieved and where secondary education is still the privilege of a minority. At the very least, there could be a misallocation of resources dealing over-education to some, and under education to others and depriving yet others of any education at all. We could discuss possible explanations for these discrepancies, but as far as I know we do not have the evidence to assess which would be the most accurate.

A refinement in this inconsistency appears between states which operate centralised exam systems, on the one hand, and those which, on the other, allow each school to graduate its own students within broad guidelines. Within the second group, such latitude occurs that exact comparisons between schools and particular subjects are almost impossible. For the first group, such comparisons can be - and are - easily made between schools, subjects and, most critically, between individual pupils. A consequence is that, in the second group, employers set qualifications simply in terms of level of schooling; whereas those where centralised exams are organised, are much more specific in their requirements. The Sri Lanka government for example required clerks to have achieved a

minimum of 6 O levels, of which 4 had to be credits - at least 50 per cent marks -, of which one had to be mathematics and another had to be Sinhala, Tamil or English and achieved in no more than two attempts. The Gambian civil service was less exacting in one way but more so in another. It demanded only 4 O levels with only pass marks, if mathematics and English were included, but it required all 4 to be achieved in one sitting. If mathematics were failed, then 5 O levels were required instead, again only with pass marks and again at only one sitting. The Kenyan civil service was more exacting, but also more elaborately flexible. It asked for 6 East African Certificate of Education passes with 2 credits; 5 East African Certificate of Education passes with 2 credits (sic, but 3 credits were probably intended); the E.A.Certificate of Education with 4 credits; or the General Certificate of Education with 4 O levels. The Gambia and Kenya governments judged that 4 O levels were sufficient for clerical officers. The Ghana government, however, even though it shared the same examination board with Gambia, - the West African Examinations Council -, took the view that its clerical work needed 5 O level passes, including English.

There variations and trade-offs in educational attainment are puzzling to square with the idea of the relatively homogeneous set of functions performed by clerical workers. Perhaps then there is only a loose and variable fit between jobs and education. How loose and how variable is an important issue, if not for efficiency and productivity in jobs, at least for the volume and allocation of resources for education.

More open inconsistency is found, when the same job title calls for different levels of education, directly indicating requirements for a different amount of schooling. Managers in the Philippines are expected to have university degrees, which entail at least 16 years of schooling. In neighbouring Indonesia, the average manager in the late 70's had been in school for less than 12 years. The import of this difference of 4 years is underlined by recalling that most people in most developing countires still achieve only 5 or 6 years of school in all.

Inconsistencies between employers in different countries might not seem so telling. More significant perhaps are the inconsistencies between employers of a single country or even within a single employer. In the 70's in Sri Lanka groups of clerks could be found doing the same job under a single supervisor. Within a single group education could range from 8 to 15 years, (the mean difference was 2 to 3 years). Similarly wide differences could be found among managers in a single organisation. Corresponding examples could be quoted from Ghana and Mexico and probably any country one could care to name.

Conversely, people of equal educational attainment could be found spread through a number of jobs within a single hierarchy. University graduates could be found as clerks, executives and managers within one employer and so could secondary school leavers.

Concomitant with the diffusion of qualifications along the job-band is the escalation of qualifications for particular jobs. The process seems universal: employers everywhere require higher and higher general qualifications for jobs which seem to change little. We shall return to the point later.

The inconsistency between jobs and qualifications was highlighted by Hallak and Caillods, who suggested that qualifications depended less upon the nature of jobs and more upon the nature of the employer. Economic sector, ownership, size and degree of modernity affected the qualifications an employer required, even though the jobs to be done were much the same. The impression is that setting qualifications is less a matter of systematic evaluation and more a function of circumstance and possibly arbitrary decision.

DETERMINING QUALIFICATIONS

So, how do employers decide what qualifications they need for particular jobs? A naively technocratic view might suppose that the following stages would be undertaken:

1. analyse the job into its component functions;
2. test what levels of general schooling and special training are required to cope with the functions;
3. asses what other qualities are needed for the smooth execution of the job within the environment and ethic of the organisation;
4. assess whether further schooling or other qualities might be required for promotion, if promotion and a career were part of normal employment;
5. recruit and select according to the findings.

The technocrat would be disappointed, however. Most employers are much less systematic. Even among the 17 government civil services looked at, only one, Liberia, appeared to have actually undertaken such an exercise comprehensively. Of 26 private employers in Mexico, only 6 had introduced some form of job evaluation. Perhaps surprisingly, educational qualifications were their last consideration, after they had fixed the salary applicable: what sort of education would such a salary attract at the time? Education, then, was determined not by the needs of the job, but by the 'market' and the going rate. Did the employers want or expect anything from education?

At the opposite end, most civil services calibrate their salaries less by what the job involves and more by the qualifications of their staff. Thus Clerical Officers in Kenya with O levels are paid more than those without O levels but promoted for good performance; Clerical Officers who have failed their A levels are paid more than those with O levels, and those who have passed their A levels are paid more than the rest. The important feature to keep in mind is that the promotees, O level leavers and A level leavers would all be in the same job group, with the same title and identical functions. But in sole virtue of educational qualifications, the A level leavers would enjoy a 38 per cent salary advantage (1979 scales) over the promotee. Yet in 1972 a Government commission had advocated the principle of paying by job requirements not by qualifications. Kenya's Civil Service was of course not unique in this approach to education, jobs and salaries.

In between these two poles are the bulk of employers, who appear not to have any well tested means of relating educational qualifications to job functions. Instead, the impression is that the process of determining

educational requirements is very particularistic: each employer has its own rules of thumb. This leads, as would be expected, to a lot of disagreement between employers. Indeed, a study of British employers by Brunel University in 1984 concluded that there was nothing that could be called "an employers view".

PREFERRING THE MORE EDUCATED

Nonetheless, employers tend - with many exceptions - to prefer applicants with more schooling, whether or not they need them. Perhaps the more schooled are thought to do jobs better? Again, the employers do not permit a single or simple answer: they disagree among themselves all over the place - Mexico, Ghana, Kenya, India, Zambia, Indonesia, Panama.

Despite a bias towards the more schooled, however, employers do seem to be nervous about hiring the over-schooled or over-qualified. The main reason is not that such people get bored, but rather that they demand promotion too quickly and too impatiently.

SUPERIOR SOCIAL SKILLS

An example from Sri Lanka illustrates that for a number of employers having more schooling is associated with superior social skills. "Good all rounders" from "first rate" schools were what 10 private employers sought. Such boys and girls were "usually from families who have influence in society, and their school friends are also going to have influence in society. So they are going to be useful to the organisation. And also they can hold their own, when they go out to meet members of the public. They know how to mix with proper people". (Deraniyagala et. al., 1978, 38). Similar examples could easily be given for numerous other countries. They show the influence more of social class than of schooling as such, (both are part of education), but help explain the upward drift of qualifications.

MORAL OBLIGATION

An additional element of explanation came from the moral obligation employers felt towards the longer schooled. A civil servant in Ghana could defend the preference by pointing out, "These people have been weeping over their exams, not just doing ordinary jobs. They deserve more". A private paper company in Mexico justified raising its qualifications with the protest: ".. doctors are now selling medicines - so we cannot go on filling the company with people of secondary education."

ESCALATING QUALIFICATIONS

The tendency to prefer the more schooled concords, of course, with observations that the educational qualifications of those holding jobs seems to be influenced more by the supply of qualifications than by the needs of jobs. Taking the uncertain link between jobs and qualifications along with the informal preferences for the universally increasing supply of the more schooled yields an expectation that the formal minimum qualifications for jobs will inexorably rise, independently of changes in

the nature of jobs. As so it has been found in virtually every country examined, industrialised or developing.

CONCLUSIONS

The overwhelming impression from the evidence surveyed is that there is no neat and universal explanation of what employers want from school and university education. Still less is there any firm connection between scholastic qualifications and job functions. Any expectation of consistency within large organisations which try to be rational is disappointed.

The almost universal absence of systematic matching makes it more appropriate to think in terms of a theory composed of unexamined assumptions, rules-of-thumb, inertia and narrowly responses to changing circumstances. There is consensus on only one point, the desirability of some schooling for employment in the modern sector. Apart from that, the relative importance of aspects like 'adequate preparation', 'identifying ability and potential', 'screening for social compatibility' or even 'political screening', is subject to dispute and wide variation.

Qualifications or educational credentials seem then to form simply a convenient starting point: they offer some fixedness or stability in situations of uncertainty. To use them to make a first distinction between people is accepted as non-arbitrary and fair, whatever their drawbacks, everybody is subject to them. Such a convenience works well enough even for governments, when they are acting as employers, the largest in the countries.

But what implications might be drawn for governments, when they are acting as educators, the largest in their countries? Perhaps they ought to recognise explicitly that the links between levels of schooling and particular jobs are largely arbitrary. They might then set about their educational reforms with less attention to manpower and much more attention to high quality schooling from Grade 1 through to the point where they can afford to give everybody a place. Let the selection and training for jobs be arranged by the job-givers, i.e. the employers.